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ABSTRACT

In response to rapidly falling foreign language enrollments, the State University of New York College at New Paltz designed and actively promoted a language immersion program in the summer of 1981. The program consisted of instruction in twelve languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Russian, Spanish, and Yiddish) at four levels. Students could enroll in any one course or in a sequential combination of two-week sessions of five-day-a-week, five-hour-a-day instruction. Emphasis was on development of conversational ability in practical situations. Class size rarely exceeded twelve. Practice with recorded materials in the language laboratory or at home supplemented classroom work. In 1981-1984, almost 1500 students enrolled, coming from in-state, other states, and foreign countries. In 1981-82, in response to expressed student interest, a series of 12 weekend sessions was begun, each offering 15 hours of intensive language instruction. Student motivation for the short programs was found to be high, and many of the students have enrolled in regular session courses. One major problem in program development has been a scarcity of suitable instructional materials. (MSE)

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Teaching Languages Through Immersion
Henry Urbanski

During the early 1970s, the State University of New York, College at New Paltz abolished the Foreign Language requirement for graduation. This change in policy, along with nationwide trends, resulted in a significant decline in enrollment in foreign language courses, and a consequent loss of instructional lines. For example, the French faculty went from ten in the late 1960s to three in 1982; Spanish decreased from nine to five, German from five to two, and Russian from two to one.

New, innovative programs were needed to reverse the downward trend in the study of foreign languages. This is how the idea of the Language Immersion Program was born. In the summer of 1980, under my leadership, a Foreign Language task force worked on details and developed an attractive brochure describing the program and the advantages of New Paltz as a study site in the Catskill region, within easy reach of major population centers. 15,000 copies of the brochure went to colleges and universities throughout the country. News releases in local papers, radio advertising on major networks like CBS and regional stations were part of a campaign to reach the widest possible audience.

Convinced that intensive study of a foreign language can create a highly effective and exciting learning environment, in which participants progress rapidly and gain greater confidence and enthusiasm to develop their fluency, we set out in the summer of 1981 to teach twelve languages at four levels: Intensive Elementary One and Two, Intensive Intermediate, and Intensive Advanced. Here is how the program works: participants may enroll in any one session or in a sequential combination of two-week sessions. Classes meet five days a week, five hours each morning, from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., for a total of fifty contact hours.

The emphasis is on the development of conversational ability in practical situations, with the goal to make travel and experience abroad more productive and enjoyable, and to facilitate basic communication for those who may use the language in their work. Class size rarely exceeds twelve and is often well below that. Practice with recorded materials in the language laboratory and

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at home supplements the class work. Students are encouraged to live on campus in a language dormitory and take their meals with their instructors to allow for further practice. Where possible, contacts with foreign students on campus are arranged or recommended.

We also provide for a variety of cultural and recreational activities. These include foreign films, music, singing and dancing, an "ethnic" dinner and various sports activities, all conducted in the respective languages. The sessions conclude with a graduation banquet at which all students perform skits and songs in the languages they have studied, and receive a certificate attesting to the completion of fifty hours in the language at the college level.

Before each of our summer sessions, we hold a workshop for college and high school language teachers featuring guest speakers, panel discussions and demonstrations of effective teaching methods. Workshop participants give short presentations of their teaching techniques. These presentations are used in selecting the best instructors for our Immersion Program. The core of our teaching staff are members of our own faculty whose personalities, methods, and faith in the program guarantee their success in this intensive instruction.

The program began on May 26, 1981. That first summer twelve languages including Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Russian, Spanish, and Yiddish were offered in two-week sessions. Although we encountered some problems with housing and food service on campus, the program was a resounding success. 96 percent of the students evaluated as "excellent" the quality of instruction and the intensive method. The instructors, too, were enthusiastic in their praise of the program format, the quality and motivation of the students, and the progress achieved.

Following are some highlights of the summer program:

1. Between the summer of 1981 and the summer of 1984, a total of 1467 people have enrolled.
2. 41 percent of participants have taken these courses for college credit.
3. Almost 47 percent of the total number of participants have lived in the campus language dormitory.

4. The program has drawn participants of all ages, from 11 to 80. Young participants are the exception rather than the rule, however. We recommend a lower age limit of 14.
5. Many diverse jobs and professions have been represented, including teachers, business executives, doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, retired persons and students.
6. Our participants have come from all parts of New York, and from such states as Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, Texas, North Carolina, Illinois, New Jersey, Michigan and Vermont. We have welcomed participants from Canada, Bolivia and Italy. One year, three Pan Am executives came from Saudi Arabia to study Arabic with us.
7. The most popular languages are French and Spanish. German and Italian had a relatively slow start, but enrollments in these languages have grown dramatically.

As a result of the first successful summer program, we received many requests for shorter courses, so we instituted a series of twelve weekend sessions in 1981-82. On a typical weekend, from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon, a total of fifteen hours of intensive instruction and conversation are held again at the Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced levels. The reaction by students and instructors has been enthusiastic. Over 3400 people, college students and outsiders, have participated, and many are planning to return.

Because of the increasing popularity of the Language Weekends, we established a similar program at the nearby Mohonk Mountain House in June 1982. These weekend "Tower of Babel" courses are held in June and November each year. Since their inception, the enrollment has increased from 33 to 165 per weekend, and they have been so well-received that additional weekends in 1985 and 1986 have been scheduled. Likewise, the one-week long January program has been well-received since its debut in 1984.

Not all languages, of course, are taught in each session or every available weekend. The less popular languages, in fact, are now offered only on certain selected weekends and during selected summer sessions. But often, enrollment grows as word gets around. German and Italian are examples.

As the program developed, the New Paltz faculty could not teach all the courses, so we hired teachers from neighboring community colleges and high

schools. One of the benefits for the department is closer contact with area schools and a more direct, practical acquaintance with our colleagues. Conversely, regional schools, their staff and students become more aware of the existence and quality of the foreign language program at New Paltz, and the status and image of our college benefits from the success of the program. For the outside faculty, this is of course part-time employment, and not the most dependable kind. Often it is only a few days before the weekend that the need for additional instructors arises. Even for the two-week summer session, it sometimes remains in doubt until the last minute whether a class will materialize.

For the instructor, however, the intensive weekend or summer session is an invaluable experience. Being aware of the fact that one has these people for such a short time helps to focus one's efforts and make the most of the time available. Limited, achievable objectives allow students and teachers to overcome one hurdle at a time.

Motivation is high from the start and can be sustained much more easily than when facing the prospective of extensive, open-ended study ahead. We do not deny the value and importance of long-term involvement in the foreign language and culture; nor do we claim that the intensive courses are substitutes for extensive study. However, they provide an opportunity to "try out" a new language in a relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere. This experience overcomes fears and whets the appetite for more. And these Immersion Programs do, in fact, increase enrollments in regular courses. Many Immersion Program students, for example, continue in the regular courses during the semester.

Since 1970, our summer program in the Soviet Union has had an intensive on-campus pre-session, a small scale precursor of the Immersion Program. Resulting from such experiences, we are planning to offer a one-credit weekend as an optional extension of the regular three-credit elementary course, and to experiment with a weekend co-requisite for some elementary courses. We see this as an area capable of considerable development.

One of the major problems in establishing the Immersion Program has been scarcity of suitable class materials. These materials need to be compact, up-to-date, lively and directed at an adult clientele; they must cover the essentials of structure and vocabulary, yet be flexible and adaptable for use

in a series of successive weekends. While serious and substantial, the texts should also entertain in the best sense. Our participants, volunteers with a wide range of motivations, want to and should enjoy the experience. Books are made available for class use or can be purchased, as the students prefer. The materials in these texts can be used selectively, and at the elementary level, as many as three chapters can be covered in a weekend in this fashion. In all cases, the instructor has to muster great flexibility, adjusting to the composition of the group, their attention spans, their range of preparation and their special interests. (One fairly advanced summer group, for example, demanded practice in reading and work on the more complex grammatical structures. It turned out to be a most rewarding and enjoyable experience for all involved.) We are still planning to develop our own materials specifically tailored to the Immersion Program; some progress has been made in that direction.

As of this writing, we have reached the half-way point in our Fourth Weekend Immersion Program. This year, we have added Portuguese and Swedish to our list of languages offered.

Generally, it is clear that the programs will undergo modifications and changes as they grow. But they have already brought to New Paltz new students who had previously been unaware of our foreign language offerings. Also, for the first time in many years, we are now meeting our student enrollment quotas during the academic year and are creating additional teaching positions for these special programs. Their role and importance for the school and the department, as well as the general public, is well established. We attribute the success of these programs to the following factors:

1. Enthusiastic, dynamic instructors committed to the intensive approach to language instruction, selected on the basis of personal acquaintance and participation in teachers' workshops.
2. Careful selection of teaching materials geared to stimulating conversation in practical situations.
3. Implementation of the latest, most effective teaching techniques.
4. A relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere conducive to learning and using the target language.

5. Participants' immediate sense of accomplishment in a short period of time.
6. Small classes.
7. Convenient location within a short driving distance from major population areas.
8. Convenient weekend schedules, and summer courses coinciding with vacation schedules.
9. Support and cooperation from the college administration.
10. Aggressive, large-scale promotion.

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